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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 003723

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: MBEKI COMES UNDER CRITICISM AS PARTY ELECTION NEARS

REF: A. PRETORIA 2817

[1](#)B. PRETORIA 3603

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) President Thabo Mbeki's approval rating fell from 54 percent in June to 40 percent in September, its lowest point in four years, according to nation-wide poll results released by private international polling agency TNS Research on 22 October. The single most newsworthy event in that three-month period was Mbeki's firing of the deputy health minister (Ref A) in defense of embattled Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. Support among blacks fell from 65 percent to 53 percent, while support among whites was halved. Neil Higgs, TNS Research Surveys Director, noted that a significant number of those polled -- a record 17 percent since the poll started seven years ago -- said they did not know what to make of Mbeki's recent performance. "Mbeki's lack of visibility clearly is a problem," Higgs said. (NOTE: Mbeki's approval rating climbed steadily throughout his first term, from a low of 32 percent after he became President to a peak of 66 percent in June 2004. END NOTE)

[1](#)2. (SBU) Since the poll was completed, Mbeki also has come under increasing criticism for suspending the National Director of Public Prosecutions Vusi Pikoli, for the cancellation of arrest and search warrants for Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi (Ref B), and for alleged heavy-handed tactics investigating the Sunday Times editor Mondli Makhanya and his deputy Jocelyn Maker (septel) after the paper exposed Health Minister Tshabalala-Msimang's theft conviction in the late 1970s and allegations of alcohol abuse. Higgs has said publicly he suspects Mbeki's ratings will be even lower when the results of ongoing polling are compiled.

[1](#)3. (U) Editorialists, both domestically and internationally, are increasingly questioning Mbeki's actions and motives over the past several months, citing a lack of transparency in decision-making as the most worrisome trend. Newsweek's article, "Showing a Rough Side," notes that Mbeki's reputation as a squeaky clean, careful strategist is being called into question as Mbeki continues to make decisions that are viewed by the public as unpopular, controversial, and unjustified in the absence of clear explanations. Jacob Dlamini in the Weekender described Mbeki as "one of the pettiest Presidents South Africa is likely ever to know." Xolela Mangcu's editorial on 16 October, crafted as a letter to former President Nelson Mandela, compared Mbeki's presidency to a dictatorial regime, which "isolates individuals and punishes them in public in order to demonstrate they will not tolerate dissent." Rumor has it that Mandela tried to phone Mbeki, but Mbeki refused to speak

to him. Even Kristin Lindow, vice-president and senior credit officer at Moody's sovereign risk unit has publicly said that "investors are certainly questioning whether or not (recent developments) is a signal of a more authoritarian, rather than democratic way of operating."

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is unclear whether poll numbers will significantly affect the ANC succession race, which will be decided by 4,075 carefully selected ANC delegates (less than one one-hundreth of one percent of the population) in December. The ANC has always encouraged loyalty and obedience over dissent, and Mbeki's supporters are unlikely to switch loyalties simply based on negative press coverage eight weeks before the ANC election. In the same vein, public critics are usually not card-carrying members of the ANC and will tell anyone willing to listen that recent incidents only confirm their assessment of Mbeki as authoritarian and distant. END COMMENT.
BOST